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SUBJECT: INDICATIONS OF SOCIAL TENSIONS IN TIBET

REF: A) CHENGDU 77 B) CHENGDU 83 C) 06 CHENGDU 252

CLASSIFIED BY: Kathryn Pongonis, Acting Consul General, United States Consulate, Chengdu.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: During a recent reporting trip to the Tibetan Autonomous Region, Consulate contacts detailed several examples of religious, inter-ethnic, and Tibetan/Han business disputes. While reports of conflicts between government officials and religious believers receive more international attention, conflicts between different groups of Tibetans and between Tibetan and Han businesspeople rarely make headlines. While only anecdotal, these stories provide a glimpse into the ethnic relations of a minority region that is experiencing a new wave of Han migration from inland China. End Summary.

¶2. (C) During a March reporting trip to the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), several Consulate contacts in private conversations provided examples of societal conflicts that frequently go unreported in the press and the details of which only rarely make their way to international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) concerned with Tibet. While only anecdotal, they provide a glimpse into the ethnic relations of a minority region that is experiencing a new wave of Han migration from inland China (Ref. B).

Prayers for Long Life of Dalai Lama Dampened

¶3. (C) On March 14 the Dalai Lama celebrated his seventy-second birthday, an especially auspicious birthday following the completion of six Tibetan lunar cycles. While Tibetan Buddhists around the world gathered to pray for his long life, security was tight in Lhasa to prevent groups of believers from gathering to celebrate the day. Several contacts in Lhasa confirmed that on March 14 workers and government officials were ordered not to go to temples. The contacts said there was a heightened police presence in the Barkhor area surrounding the Jokhang Temple and in Drepung and Sera Monasteries. On March 16-17 Congenoff also observed an especially strong police presence that was approximately three to four times what it normally is in the Barkhor area.

Animal Pelt Issue Still Sensitive

¶4. (C) In January 2006 the Dalai Lama called for Buddhists to give up wearing wild animal pelts as a part of their traditional clothing. The call led to widespread burning of pelts across Tibetan regions. On February 2 a group of Tibetans wearing animal pelts was doing circumambulations of the Jokhang Temple. According to our contact, the worshipers were approached by another group of Tibetans who berated them for wearing the

skins, contrary to the Dalai Lama's wishes. According to observers, a verbal exchange ensued and the Tibetans criticizing the skin wearing were detained by police. There was no further information on whether the detainees were subsequently released.

Han-Tibetan Business-Related Conflicts

15. (C) According to a Consulate contact, in January there was a disturbance involving a Tibetan woman from the Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Gansu Province who was working at a Han Chinese-owned restaurant in Lhasa. During a dispute over wages or working conditions the employer reportedly cut the Tibetan woman's face. Later, thirty of the woman's friends came to the restaurant to "support" her. The business owner called the police and the 30 Tibetans were arrested. They were later released over a period of three months. The last individual of the original group was released the week of March 12. He told our contact that the detainees were held for two to three months without charges. The detainees were beaten and were fed poorly.

16. (C) In another business-related dispute in late 2006 or early 2007, a Tibetan trader from the Kham area of Sichuan Province working in Lhasa had a conflict with a Han Chinese businessman. The conflict occurred during one of the TAR Public Security Bureau's (PSB) "strike hard" campaigns. According to our contact, the Tibetan trader organized 200 of his friends working in Lhasa to "deal with" the Chinese businessman. The businessman called the police and many of the Tibetans were arrested. There were no further details about the outcome of the case.

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